

Sermon

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1856

Order

IDOLATRY MISREPRESENTS THE DEITY.

SERMON

AT THE

ORDINATION OF REV. IRA TRACY.

AS

MISSIONARY TO EASTERN ASIA.

WINDSOR, VT.....RICHARDS AND TRACY.



IDOLATRY MISREPRESENTS THE DEITY.

A SERMON;

DELIVERED AT THE ORDINATION OF REV. IRA TRACY,

AT HARTFORD, VT. OCT. 28, 1832.

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BY JOSEPH TRACY.
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[Published by Request.]

WINDSOR, VT.:
RICHARDS AND TRACY, PUBLISHERS.

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1833.



S E R M O N .

EXODUS XX. 4—6.—“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters under the earth : thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them ; for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.

THE most untaught heathen at Athens or at Rome would never mistake the image of Apollo for that of Jupiter, even if the bow and quiver of the one and the thunderbolt of the other were concealed from his view ; for in the very countenance of the god of song, he would see marks of that ardor of thought and feeling, which always accompany genius, while the countenance of the king of high Olympus would exhibit the calm dignity of one who feels himself worthy to be obeyed, and able to enforce obedience. So, Mars and Mercury, Juno, Minerva and Venus, all had their appropriate forms and countenances, expressive of their peculiar characters. And the modern idolaters of Italy adhere to the same principle. The artist must give to the image or picture of every saint, a face in which his character may be seen. The numerous pictures of the Virgin Mary, for instance, though wholly fictitious, being designed to exhibit the well-known peculiar traits of the character ascribed to her, are as much alike, and as readily distinguished from all other pictures, as the heads of Washington in this country.

One of the most celebrated Italian artists was employed in painting the Last Supper of our Lord. One by one he studied the characters of the apostles, and then settled in

his own mind, and then painted on the canvass, a form and countenance in which any beholder might see that character expressed. He then applied himself to the character of our Saviour. He studied the attributes of his mind and heart. He sought, in all the stores of his own inventive fancy, for a combination of features and complexion, which should express those attributes,—the conscious power, the wisdom, the holiness, the love, the mercy, the meekness, the patience, the whole character of the divine Redcemer. He sought long—intensely—but in vain. Every countenance he could imagine fell evidently far below; and at last he threw down his pencil in despair, declaring that *the face of Christ could not be painted*. He did not doubt his own ability to fix distinctly on that canvass, any imaginable face; but he had learned that no countenance can express the attributes of the Deity, and that whoever should gather his idea of the character of Christ from any visible representation of him, must of necessity be misled. Whether he made that application of his discovery or not, he had discovered the truth which is the ground of the commandment in the text, forbidding us to worship any image, or any likeness of any created thing.

The use of images, or of any visible “likeness,” in worship, cannot fail to misrepresent the divine nature. While it must inevitably fail to convey to the mind of the worshipper, such ideas of the Deity as are needed, it cannot fail to convey such as are positively injurious. “We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art, and man’s device;” nor can we think it, without injury to our minds and morals. This it will be the object of this discourse to show and apply; and you see its bearing on the propriety of our present employment, and on our duty in time to come.

I. The use of images in worship cannot fail to misrepresent the Divine Nature, for,

1. *God is a Spirit*; but an image is no representation of spiritual existence. The image is itself a mass of matter, and cannot be regarded as the image of any being in which matter has no part. It gives no intimation of ability to see without material eyes, or hear without material ears, or act in any way without a body and members, composed of matter. It continually suggests the contrary. Why

those bodily organs, if nothing of the kind is needed? Why, indeed, has it a bodily form at all, if it represents a pure spirit, which has no form? Why is it made visible, if it represents Him who is in his very nature invisible? Hence those heathens, who had thought enough to dispute at all on the subject, have disputed about the shape of the gods;—whether they have a human form, or some other form,—and whether they have a real body, or only *as it were* a body.

2. *God is eternal*; from everlasting to everlasting. Nothing pertaining to an image represents this. The image, as the beholder plainly sees, was made at some *time*. He sees the old image thrown away, and a new one put in its place; or he sees it decaying, and assists in repairing it that it may last the longer. Nor has it the form of any thing, which is known to be eternal. The form of any thing that lives suggests the thought of birth; of *beginning* to live. What more natural, than that idolaters should write books on the births and successive dynasties of the gods?

3. *God is infinite*. The image is no representation of infinity. What! Omnipresence represented by a block of wood, present only in one little place? Omnipotence represented by a body which cannot take care of itself, in the shape of a creature which is crushed before the moth? Omniscience represented by that which cannot think, in the shape of one who is of yesterday and knows nothing? Infinite goodness, represented by that which has no moral qualities, in the shape of a finite being, whose moral qualities are bad, or at best, largely mixed with evil? No. The image teaches, and cannot fail to teach, that a god is a being of limited power, acting in a limited space, under the guidance of limited knowledge and imperfect goodness, if good at all, and liable to fail in his efforts, from the opposition of others, or from their intrinsic difficulty. And as such, the heathen have always described their gods.

4. *God is immutable*. He changes not. An image cannot represent immutability. Every body knows that it became an image by undergoing changes in the hands of the craftsman; and every body knows that, if its shape shall be found defective, its head too large or its arm too small, the craftsman can change it again, as it shall please him. Nor is it in the shape of any thing immutable. Both man and beast are continually changing, both in body and mind. How

could we expect, then, that idolaters would not represent their gods as changeable,—abandoning one purpose and taking up another, and displeased now with what pleased them formerly, so that their worshippers know not where to find them?

5. *God is the Creator.* An image cannot be a representation of creative power. Itself is made of created matter. Its form, its existence as an image, was given it by the labor of man. It is dead, and can do nothing. Nor is it in the shape of any thing that has creative power. Look at it. Does *that* look as if it could make any thing? or as if any thing which it represents could cause matter to exist? The heathen themselves do not think so. Their gods, according to their own account, never caused matter to exist. They only churned the sea, and brought up the dry land out of it; or, in some other way equally ridiculous, gave the world its present form. And now, they think, the world stands of itself. The gods neither created it at first, nor uphold it by the word of their power.

6. *God is one.* He is God alone, and there is none like him. Images cannot represent this. The very idea of an image implies that there may be something like him. All the attributes which an image can express, are such as may belong to more than one subject. Imagine a god to be any thing which an image can represent, and you see no reason why there may not be twenty or a hundred such. Indeed, if a god is such a limited being as the image suggests, and if their influence is exerted every where, there must be a host of them. Hence, idolaters always have many gods. Hence, again, on some occasions, they know not to what god they ought to pray, or whether some other god, or combination of gods, may not oppose the granting of their requests. How can they know it, when, perhaps, there are thousands of gods, of whom they never heard? And how can they know that the service they render to one will not displease a multitude of others, and thus raise up against them a host of enemies, against whom their god will be unable to defend them?

7. *God is unassailable.* No creature, or combination of creatures, can make any approaches towards interrupting or diminishing his perfect blessedness. No image can represent this. Consider how an image looks. Does its appearance impress upon your mind the belief, that the being

whom it represents is far above, out of your reach? How easily it is defaced, or broken! How certainly, if let alone, it will tumble to ruin of itself! If it resembles any living thing, how easy may that which it resembles be put in pain, or put to death!

8. *God cannot be tempted.* An image gives no indication of superiority to temptation. As to its substance, it is dead matter, and beneath temptation. Its form, whether brute or human, is the form of something which can be tempted to its ruin. So far, then, as the contemplation of the image has any influence, the god will be regarded as liable, not only to be tempted, but to be led astray by temptation; and such is the history of the heathen gods.

9. *God is superior to human appetites and passions.* Not only is he secure against temptation from without, but free from any principles or movements in his own mind, which have any tendency to lead him astray. This, too, the image, with all its influence, denies. It either likens the god to a brute, led wholly by appetite without reason, or compares him to a man, every imagination of the thoughts of whose heart is only evil continually. But, we are told, the god has an expressive countenance. True; but what does it express? Human thought, human appetites, human passions; or brutal ferocity, or stupidity; or some monstrous compound and exaggeration of both. This is the whole amount of what form, feature and complexion can do.

Such, then, is the influence of image worship, and as such, under its influence, do the heathen learn to regard their gods; not pure spirits; not eternal; limited in power, knowledge, goodness, and sphere of action; changeable; destitute of creative power; not above the possibility of having an equal, but actually having equals, and many of them superiors; liable to injury; capable of temptation; led astray by appetite and by passion.

Are we told that some heathens have entertained higher views? I grant that something of the original revelation of God to man was long handed down by tradition; that now and then, aided by the Spirit of God, it enlightened a soul into the knowledge of God; and at other times, meeting a superior mind, it blazed up into a philosophy at war with the prevailing faith. But the whole influence of image worship fought against it, and, with few exceptions, with

entire success. The multitude entertained such views of the divine nature as images were fitted to inspire. Under its influence, the nations sunk deeper and deeper into darkness; and in the last eighteen centuries, the heathen world has not produced a Socrates or a Plutarch. Images, of necessity, do misrepresent the Divine Nature; and when used from age to age, the misrepresentation will have its effect, the true idea of God will be lost, and degrading superstition will take its place. With what entire propriety, then, are the idols of the heathen called "lying vanities!" But we have not yet exhausted the catalogue of their falsehoods.

II. They misrepresent the nature of religion. God must be worshiped "in spirit and in truth," because he "is a spirit." If he were such a being as an image might represent, spiritual worship would be wholly inappropriate. Were he such, he ought to be worshiped either "in Jerusalem, or in this mountain;" only at set times and places; only by the performance of prescribed ceremonies, the validity of which would depend, not on the spirit of the worshiper, but on the nice observance of the outward form. This limited God must be worshiped when and where he could be found; and at other times and places, his worship may be neglected. This corporeal god must be worshiped by bodily acts, which the senses may perceive. This god with human or brutal passions and appetites, must be worshiped with what gratifies such passions and appetites;—even if it be the secret or public performance of abominations, of which it is a shame even to speak. If his nature be such as a brutal image may represent, he must be coaxed and wheedled, fed, caressed and managed, like a powerful beast, whose assistance we need. If it be such as a human figure may represent, he must be managed as we manage men. We must leave nothing to his integrity. We must place no reliance on his own love of righteousness, and truth, and mercy. We must observe the prescribed forms of doing business with him. We must commend our cause to his favorable regard, by whatever will flatter his pride or gratify his inclinations. If he is our enemy, we must make such concessions and send him such gifts as will appease his wrath and purchase his favor; or, if we do not choose to give up the point in dispute between us and him, we must apply to other gods for assistance, and form an al-

liance with one or more of them, by whose help we may stand our ground for a while, and carry our point in defiance of the god who is our enemy, and whose favor it will be well to recover soon by costly gifts, lest he come upon us in revenge while our defenders are asleep or on a journey.

And if such be the worship, what will be the religion, to which this worship belongs? What are those habits of thought and feeling, which such worship may express and promote? Evidently, not that fearless regard to *right*, which follows principles, let them lead where they will; not that generous, self-sacrificing regard for others, which is as careful of their welfare as of our own; not intense and habitual longings and endeavors after a degree of holiness, to which even the gods are believed to be strangers; not the crucifying of the flesh, with the affections and lusts, and the deliberate seeking of none but spiritual joys. Instead of these, there will be a giving up of the soul to that imperfection, from which even the gods are not free; a seeking of those gratifications, which even the gods value, and by which their favor is purchased; a spirit of calculation and planning and bargaining for the means and opportunities of selfish indulgence. Repentance, mourning for sin because it is exceeding sinful, can have no place in it; but in its stead there will be sorrow for omitting some device, by which the help of some god in seeking our own pleasure might have been procured. Faith, founded on principle, the committing of our souls in the ways of well-doing to him that judgeth righteously, can have no place in it; but instead of it, a reliance on forms and ceremonies and gifts, and on our own skill and faithfulness in applying them. And with faith and repentance, regeneration, which cannot exist without them, is excluded, and man is left to the guidance of those mere natural principles, under the guidance of which he is dead in trespasses and sins.

III. Image worship misleads the mind with respect to morals; and by morals, in this place, I mean our duties towards each other.

Had this been announced in the beginning of this discourse, it might have provoked some smiles of incredulity; but after what has been said, an argument is scarce needed to prove it. How can a high and pure morality dwell in that mind, whose intercourse with the gods, whose religion,

is a mere tissue of bargaining and intrigue for selfish gratification? Honest on principle towards men, while destitute of principle towards the gods—those gods in whose existence he believes, and with whom he has to do every day! Acting upon higher and purer principles towards men, than he supposes the gods act upon towards him! Kept from all vice, at all times, and in all places, by his regard for gods who are neither omnipresent, omniscient nor omnipotent! Kept from crime by his fear of a god, whose favor may be bought by a sacrifice that will cost a dollar! Made to restrain his passions, by his reverence for gods who are of like passions with himself! Refined from the indulgence of sensual appetites, by meditating on gods, who feel the same appetites and love to indulge them! It cannot be. Image worship teaches the principles of immorality, and reduces them to practice towards the gods; and the worshipers will be sure to go away and reduce them to practice towards men. If one principle of truth or honesty or purity is found in an idolater, it comes from some other source, and the whole influence of his religion is, to drive it from him. Its whole influence is, to make men “earthly, sensual, devilish;” and where it has prevailed for ages, it would be unreasonable to expect any thing different from what we find there;—sensuality, and covetousness, and cunning, and falsehood, and cruelty.

How different, when a local centre and imposing ceremonies of worship were proper, the establishment which the wisdom of God provided for his ancient people! In every part of their land, and in every country of their wanderings, at the time of the morning and evening sacrifice, every Israelite prayed with his face toward Jerusalem. And three times in the year, all the males to whom it was possible must appear there at the solemn feasts. And why this honor done to Jerusalem? Because there was the temple, with all its beauty, its richness and its grandeur, its furniture of gold and silver, and its trains of priests adorned with garments, made for beauty and for glory. But the temple itself was not the holiest. It borrowed its sacredness from the holy of holies, into which the high priest alone might enter once in the year, and then not without blood. And the holy of holies itself was but a covering ~~but~~ for the still more sacred ark. And the ark itself was but a coffer, to contain the real centre of Israel's worship—and what was

that sacred deposite in the ark, that holy and venerable centre, towards which all feet travelled, and all eyes turned, and all hearts felt themselves drawn, at the stated seasons of prayer and praise? You know the answer—the ark contained TRUTHS, PRINCIPLES, IDEAS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE CHARACTER OF A HOLY GOD; precepts, which carried the mind upward to him whom no eye hath seen, and who alone is absolute goodness; which sent the mind abroad in thoughts of just and kind regard for our fellow-men, rendering to every one his due; and which bade the mind look inward upon its own secret recesses, and search out and expel every hidden and lurking tendency to evil. To give glory and dignity and influence to this, was the whole object of that august ceremonial; and to this, even the visible glory over the mercy seat was only an appendage. Here was something to make men think, and to guide their thoughts. Here, every thing that could charm and dazzle and overawe the senses, was made to carry the thoughts and the affections beyond objects of sense, and fasten them upon those eternal truths, that pure and holy law, which is first written by the finger of God,—whether it be on tables of stone, or on fleshly tables of the heart. Here was that which could purify the soul, and make it both the abode and radiating centre of holy blessedness on earth, and fit for heaven.—From all these, idolatry, as we have seen, takes away the mind. It causes them to be forgotten. In successive generations, it prevents their being known. It teaches their exact opposite; and therefore, with its whole influence, drags the mind down, first to earth, and then to hell.

Does any one call this mere human reasoning, and demand proof from scripture? It shall be given. You shall have the same arguments, for substance, in the same order, leading to the same conclusion, from an inspired apostle.

Turn to the first chapter of the epistle to the Romans, 23d verse, and you will read that the heathen “changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image, made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four footed beasts, and creeping things.” Note the *change* of which the apostle speaks. Before the change, the object of worship was the glorious and incorruptible God; afterwards, it was an image, made like to corruptible man and lower animals. After the change, they had a “corruptible” object of worship,

in the likeness of "corruptible" creatures. The God they now worshiped had not the "*glory* of the incorruptible God." It was destitute of that glory, which Moses prayed that God would show him, when God granted his request by causing his "goodness" to pass before him; that "glory of the Lord" by beholding which "we are changed into the same image, from glory to glory." It was destitute of that moral excellence, the contemplation of which could exert a transforming, purifying influence upon the worshipers. When they had thus "changed" the truth of God into a lie—changed the truth concerning God for a lie concerning God, or rather, changed the true God for an idol which misrepresented him, the 25th verse informs us, their worship degenerated; they "worshiped and served the creature, more than, or rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever." There was no spiritual worship; no worship which could express or promote holiness of heart. It consisted in treating a mere creature as God. Their worship, therefore, like their God, was a lie, and could only lead on still deeper into error and into sin. The consequences, you may read in the remaining verses of this chapter. They were "filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, back-biters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful." Such is idolatry, and such are idolaters, as described in the word of God; and heathens in different and distant parts of the world have been astonished at its accuracy, and have been convinced by reading this very passage, that this book must be the work of one, who knows all the secrets of men. Well did the same Apostle say, that "idolaters shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

It is not, then, a vain thing, to seek the conversion of the heathen. We engage in no wild and useless crusade against speculations which do neither good nor harm. Idolatry is in the world. It now envelopes three-fourths of the human race in its darkness. They bow down to that which is not God. Their worship excites no holy thoughts; strengthens no holy purpose; gives no holy joy, no holy peace, no holy hope. Their very religion leads them away from all that can purify and save; away from all views of God and of

truth, which can strengthen them to resist temptation, or which can encourage penitence ; from all that can, as the human soul needs, guide in prosperity, console in affliction, and sustain in the hour of death. Their very worship makes them more and more the slaves of appetite and passion, blinds them to the nature and obligation of duty, and turns them loose to degrade themselves and destroy each other by sensuality, violence and fraud. Through its influence, "the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty." Even the ties of kindred are broken, and parents sacrifice their children and children their parents to them that are no gods, or cast them away to die, merely to be rid of their burden. They "bite and devour one another," as they move in one dark mass down the broad way that leadeth to destruction. And these evils are not found united with idolatry only now and then, and by accident. They attend it like its shadow. They wait upon it, as disease does on contagion. Night is not more sure to be accompanied with darkness, than idolatry with vice. The whole history of the world shows it ; and the reasonings to which we have attended show why it is so. And history also confirms—what those same reasonings teach us—that when men are effectually called off from idolatry to the belief of the gospel, when men forsake the worship of idols and learn to worship God, who is an uncreated spirit, the maker and upholder of all things, whose eye is upon all actions and all hearts, to notice and reward the evil and the good,—when they learn to rely on the great sacrifice of the Son of God for sin, and the aid of the Spirit of God to overcome sin,—then do those evils vanish, like darkness before the rising sun.

The question of Christian missions to idolatrous nations, then, is not the mere question whether they shall keep their old absurdities of opinion and worship, or whether our pride shall be gratified by seeing them forsake their own ways for ours. Nor is it the mere question, whether their understandings shall be enlightened, and the progress of the human race in correct speculation be accelerated. It is the question, whether they shall have a faith that purifies, or one that defiles ; whether they shall understand what duties they owe to each other, and the reasons why they should perform those duties ; whether they shall regard sin as a mere error, for which sacrifices and sufferings of their own may

be a full atonement, or as a damage inflicted upon their own souls. The question is, whether they shall learn to deal honestly with the God whom they worship, and in learning that, learn the principle of honesty, which they need in their intercourse with men; whether they shall learn purity of heart, from the worship of a God who is pure; kindness, from the worship of a God who is kind; benevolence, from the worship of a benevolent God; and all moral excellence, from the worship of a God, in whom every possible excellence is found in its perfection. The question is, shall they learn all these, or shall they continue ignorant? And not only ignorant, but go on learning the contrary; for idolaters wax worse and worse. Yes; the third and fourth, and every generation of them that hate God, makes progress in sin. The human race did not cease falling when Adam fell; but every successive generation of them that depart from God falls lower and lower; and so one tribe and nation and empire after another has consumed away in its own increasing vice, and withered from the world. The question is, whether idolatrous nations shall continue in all the error and crime and wretchedness which is consuming them, till they pine away in their iniquity and die; or we will send and carry them a faith which SAVES men; a faith which acquaints them with purity, and justice, and kindness, and mercy, and which moves them who receive it to walk in ways of righteousness. And among Christian men—among any candid and sensible men, who understand the facts of the case and think seriously upon them, there can be but one answer; an answer, which approves our Saviour's last command, "Go ye into all the earth, and preach THE GOSPEL to every creature."

Do any of you shrink from this answer, lest giving it and acting consistently with it, it should cost you something? Remember, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Consider how much you prize the moral character of your children. Think how much you would expend upon them, to save them from becoming vile. Imagine that you have a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, who is learning to be dishonest; who is learning to be cruel; who is taking lessons every day, in sensuality; in the indulgence of appetite and passion; in whom all these evil practices are ripening into confirmed habits, and who is encouraged, by all that he sees and hears of morals and religion, to go on fear-

lessly in his downward course. What desires would you feel, what prayers would you offer, what efforts would you make, for the rescue of such an one? How would you look around you for help! How would you call on every one, who could exert an influence, or procure an influence to be exerted! What efforts, what sacrifices, would you think yourself justified in asking, and in duty bound to ask, of any friend, of any neighbor, of any stranger even, whose efforts and sacrifices might avail but a little! And how destitute of that fellow-feeling—that interest which man ought always to feel in the well-being of man, would you count him to be, who should see that moral ruin going on, and yet withhold the aid he might afford to prevent it!—Now look at the case before us. There are, in the regions of heathenism, a hundred million sons, and a hundred million daughters, who have not been confirmed in sin by long habits of sinning; but whom idolatry is training up to all that is vile. A hundred million sons, idolatry is teaching to do what we should shudder at the thought of doing ourselves, or seeing our sons do; and a hundred million daughters, idolatry, with the whole force of its influence, is making into what we would expend our whole estates in a single day, rather than see our daughters become. This is fact—to say nothing of twice as many more, whom idolatry has had longer under its influence, and on whom its work of debasement is more nearly complete. With these thoughts in your minds, just look at those millions, and say whether he who goes to save them is a madman, and those who aid him, fools. Just look at them; and think, for how much would you have a son or a daughter placed among them, and educated in all their abominations; and think, if your children *were* there, how much you would give, and how much you would, and without blushing, too, ask your neighbors, and even strangers, to give, to redeem them from such an education, and place them under a Christian influence, even though you were never to behold them again. How, especially, will these questions be answered by Christian ~~friends~~, who know the worth of the souls, and desire the *everlasting* welfare of those they love?

Think of these things till you understand them—till the thought assumes that form and character in your own mind, which it has in the word of God; and then, your prayers for

parents

the heathen will be heard without ceasing, and *your* influence will be felt—even *yours*—in promoting their salvation.

Think of these things, and you will see that men ought to feel and act—that it is unworthy of them to refrain from feeling and acting. Think of these things, and you will honor and bless our Lord Jesus Christ, for coming into this dark, idolatrous world, to bring and teach a gospel which would make men wise unto salvation. You will count it praise-worthy in him—yea—exalted above all blessing and praise that you can render—that he accomplished this work, even at the price of his most precious blood. And you will honor his holy Apostles, who, at the peril and expense of *their* lives went forth to the heathen, to whom he sent them, entreating them to turn from dumb idols, to serve the living God. Think of these things, and you will see a deep and solemn meaning, a thrilling and sublime propriety, in the transaction for which we are now assembled, which it has been the object of this discourse to justify in the sight of all your consciences, and for the further prosecution of which I now give way. May the Lord command his blessing upon it, for his Son's sake—AMEN.

